

## BOOK REVIEW

MARCH 2015

## Lifting the veil on human trafficking

*Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States.* By Denise Brennan, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014, 304 pp., \$23.95/paperback.

In *Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States*, author Denise Brennan weaves real stories of trafficked individuals, together with her exploration of recent policies and their short- and long-term effects on those who are trafficked, to give a human element to the statistics. The author approaches the topic with a thorough and multifaceted lens. Seeking out and following trafficked people across the United States, some for as long as 9 years, she gleans their unique experiences before and after forced labor. Then, familiarizing herself with membership-based migrants' rights and workers' rights organizations, she builds extended relationships with them in order to further antitrafficking causes. To her credit, Brennan also collects a great deal of her research material from those (such as attorneys, social workers, shelter staff, and case managers) providing frontline assistance to trafficked individuals in search of a better life. This book should appeal to anyone who wants to learn more about the devastating and long-lasting impact of human trafficking at both the global and individual/familial level from those who lived it, as well as the effectiveness of current immigration policies.

In her introduction, Brennan states, "[t]rafficking into forced labor is migration gone awry." She highlights how individuals seeking better economic opportunities too often instead become ensnared in the world of trafficking and end up in forced labor across the United States. Because these individuals have only limited or no legal status, and lack not only resources but knowledge of their rights and of U.S. labor practices, they frequently remain silent about the abuse and exploitation they suffer. Brennan also makes the important point that trafficked individuals are diverse, making each situation a challenge in terms of detection, assistance, and prevention; further, she explains how locating trafficked people can be elusive, because they rarely seek assistance for being a "victim of trafficking," but are more apt to seek resources having to do with domestic violence or deportation issues.

The book has two distinct parts: "The Assault on Workers" and "Life after Forced Labor."

In "The Assault on Workers," Brennan acknowledges that extreme abuse tends to be an exception and that lesser forms of exploitation, such as wage theft and excessive hours of work, occur more frequently with migrant workers who are forced into labor. She successfully illustrates how the current framework of government policy, including both a lack of accountability on the part of those who flout proper labor practices and the vulnerable status of migrant workers, creates an invisible world of trafficked individuals. She effectively explores the many ways that fear, coercion, and control are utilized to keep vulnerable victims silent and compliant.

Brennan addresses some urban legends pertaining to sex-related forced labor that fuel misunderstanding, especially those surrounding events such as World Cups and Super Bowls. For example, a Dallas police sergeant predicted, "50,000 to 100,000 prostitutes could descend on the metroplex" during the 2011 Super Bowl. Unsubstantiated claims such as this help drive the focus of attention exclusively on the trafficking of sex-related forced labor at the expense of other forms of trafficking.

Having worked in the field of domestic violence for many years, I took special note of (1) trafficked individuals who were forced into labor by their intimate partners and (2) trafficked individuals without

a history of domestic violence who were nonetheless forced to obtain help from domestic violence shelters because of a lack of resources for their specific needs. As the author points out, many trafficked individuals are instead first classified as victims of domestic violence. Care must be taken to correctly identify the source of the problem in order to provide the proper services.

In part two, “Life after Forced Labor,” Brennan’s commitment to thoroughly understand the nature of the topic is apparent through her painstaking attempts to maintain contact (usually over a number of years) with former victims once they leave servitude. She highlights their successes and positive state of mind once they leave forced labor, but cautions that current policy and limited resources may still hinder their growth.

Throughout the book, Brennan shares vignettes and details from the lives of trafficked individuals. These stories open a window into the far-reaching effects of forced labor, not only on the lives of the victims themselves, but also on the lives of their families around the world. With so many individuals featured, I thought it would be a challenge to follow their varied stories, but the author deftly enables the reader to navigate the thread connecting them by effectively referencing a specific person or situation from earlier in the book to illustrate a point or explain information in further detail later on.

Brennan consciously chooses not to draw a lot of formal conclusions, given the constantly changing lives, policies, and environment of the world of those trafficked into forced labor. She does provide a detailed appendix, however, that includes state and national resources and ways to get involved in building awareness and empowering workers.

*Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States* is an indepth examination of the recent condition of individuals trafficked into forced labor and of the barriers they face once they are freed from their shackles. Brennan underscores the day-to-day experiences of those forced into labor, includes insight into the conditions they face afterwards, and highlights the perseverance and passion that drive them. She works to counter misconceptions by presenting information from the very voices and viewpoints of the trafficked individuals themselves. She also strongly emphasizes the mistaken, nearly exclusive, societal focus on sex-related trafficking versus the non-sex-related forced labor more commonly experienced by trafficked people. As a result of this lopsided focus, government funding and resources, in her opinion, have too often been narrowly directed only against prostitution and sex workers. The author’s focus on the multiple barriers faced by those trafficked into forced non-sex-related labor exposes a situation that has been shrouded in isolation and covert labor practices.

Human trafficking is an ever-present, growing problem. Nearly 5,000 cases were reported to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center in 2013. On December 31, 2014, President Obama declared January 2015 as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month in recognition of the important task of preventing those twin evils. This book peels back layers of secrecy and could be considered a call to action to address the problem. It is particularly valuable to those who (like me) work in service-providing professions that may encounter this vulnerable, yet resilient, population. I recommend it highly.

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#### ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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